Report

Under-Represented Groups in Philosophy

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Jules Holroyd[*]
jules.holroyd@nottingham.ac.uk

Alessandra Tanesini[†]
tanesini@cardiff.ac.uk

There has been a recent surge in attention to the phenomena of under-representation of various groups in academic philosophy. The conference on Under-represented Groups in Philosophy held at Cardiff University on November 26th and 27th 2010 was intended as a forum to enable a better understanding of the problems surrounding under-representation in philosophy, and to examine the philosophical under-pinnings of strategies for overcoming under-representation and its attendant problems. The conference attracted speakers and participants mostly from the Anglophone world including the UK, US, Canada and Australia. All the talks were recorded and podcasts are freely available at: http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/newsandevents/events/ conferences/groups.ht

The conference venue was fully accessible to individuals with mobility impairments; all talks were translated in American and British sign language and interpreters were also present at the conference dinner. Finally, crèche facilities were available upon request to the organisers. One of the outcomes of the conference has been sustained attention to the question of how to organise conferences and workshops so that they are inclusive and accessible.[1]

The first talk *Women and Deviance in Philosophy* was delivered by Helen Beebee who at the time was the president of the British Philosophical Associa-

[*] University of Nottingham, UK.
[†] Cardiff University, UK.

[1]For example, see online discussions of accessible conferences here: http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2011/08/29/accessible-conferences-where-to-start/, and here: http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2009/05/18/last-night-i-dreamt-of-an-inclusive-conference/.

tion (an association representing the interests of professional philosophers in the UK). Beebee presented the data gathered by the BPA on the numbers of women in philosophy.[2] These data revealed a steady drop in the representation of women in philosophy in the UK. The percentage of women drops from 47% of the undergraduate student body to just 15% at professorial level. Data has not yet been gathered on disabled philosophers or black and ethnic minority philosophers, but there is reason to believe the problems are no less stark.[3] Beebee also introduced the BPA report on the status of women in the profession which has been distributed to all the heads of philosophy departments in the UK and which includes a set of recommendations on how to address the issue of under-representation.[4] In addition to presenting these data, Beebee also offered some possible explanations for the under-representation of women. Among these she noticed a certain tendency for under-representation to self-perpetuate. When members of a group are perceived as statistically rare within a population, they also tend to be conceived as defective exemplars within the population. Thus, for instance, Beebee notes that an aggressive and confrontational style of argumentation is dominant in philosophy seminars. The kind of behaviour that is often accepted in this context would be unacceptable in most other social circumstances; and there is no good reason why it should be adopted in philosophy. Further, she suggested, this style may put women off. It does this, independently of whether as a matter of fact women dislike aggression and confrontation. Rather, because this kind of behaviour is culturally associated with masculinity, its adoption sends the message that philosophy is a masculine pursuit. Hence, the message that women are atypical philosophers is re-enforced.

Whether the way in which philosophy is perceived has a role in perpetuating under-representation was a question considered by Dr Pamela Hood and Dr Mahlet Zimeta. Their papers both addressed the value of studying philosophy. Hood addressed the perception, prevalent among the students at San Francisco State University (USA) where she teaches, that philosophy is a 'white thing' and thus both too hard and irrelevant for ethnic minority and underprivi-

[2]For an overview, see the BPA 2010 newsletter, available here: http://www.bpa.ac.uk/category/news/newsletters/. More information is also available here: http://www.bpa.ac.uk/policies/

[3] See, for example, Gines, 2011.

[4]Available at: http://www.swipuk.org/notices/2011-09-08/Women%20in%20Philosophy%20in%20the%20UK%20%28BPASWIPUK%20Report%29.pdf.

leged students. Hood described her numerous strategies to address this perception by teaching philosophy in a way that made its relevance to student's lives apparent. She discussed for instance the influence of ancient Greek philosophical thought on Martin Luther King's ideas. Hood showed how one can make philosophy relevant to everyday concerns in one's teaching, and argued for the importance of challenging the stereotype of philosophy as 'abstract and irrelevant' in addressing the pipeline problems of retaining BME students in philosophy. She also emphasised the way in which this engagement with philosophy in relation to real life could in turn be empowering for students.

Zimeta also identified a concern about the way in which philosophy may be perceived, and advocated a change in the way philosophy is conceived by its practitioners so that it can become more attractive to students from underprivileged backgrounds. As it stands, she argued, philosophy is not thought of as an aspirational degree choice by these potential students who aim to be socially mobile and gain more social power. At the root of this disinterest, she argued, is a conception of philosophy as lacking in social utility. This is a conception which is re-enforced by professional philosophers who emphasise philosophy's intrinsic value rather than also its instrumental value for social advancement. To remedy this problem Zimeta proposes a change of focus in favour of the role that studying philosophy can play as a way out of poverty, by providing access to skills and qualifications that equip individuals for a range of fulfilling employments.

These explanations for under-representation rely on hypotheses about students' views about philosophy, and places the onus on those working in educational environments to think carefully about the image of the discipline that is projected. Such stereotypes about what philosophy is, and indeed 'who does philosophy', play a central role in other attempts to articulate the root causes of under-representation. A number of papers drew upon the emerging research on implicit bias in some detail.

Professor Jenny Saul, in *Unconscious Biases and Women in Philosophy* set out data on implicit biases that we might expect to hinder the progress and inclusion of women and minorities in philosophy - for example, the propensity to rate less positively CV's when they bear women's names. There is also the data emerging from research on "stereotype threat"; the phenomena of underperformance due to raised stress levels at the prospect of confirming negative stereotypes. The data on these two phenomena, Saul argued, provide good reason to suppose that some procedures in philosophy do not meet the re-

quirements for equality of opportunity. For example, if in hiring procedures women and minorities are not evaluated equally, nor compete under the same conditions (due to stereotype threat) as candidates from groups that are not under-represented, then such procedures, Saul argues, do not adhere to principles of fair equality of opportunity. In her paper (available online[5]), some proposals for mitigating bias are considered.

As Saul acknowledges, none of the data gathered has been about philosophers, and although there is reason to suppose that philosophers are as liable to implicit bias as anyone else, the premises of her argument could be bolstered if data were to show that philosophers do harbour implicit biases, and that these are of the kind that could feature in (partial) explanations for the under-representation of women and minorities in philosophy. Moreover, greater understanding of the nature of implicit bias, and the kinds of cognitive architecture that support the elimination or mitigation of biases, should further help in equipping individuals and institutions with proposals for how to avoid biased responses. Much of this work will be empirical, but there is much conceptual and philosophical work also to be done (what is implicit bias? what epistemic responsibilities might individuals have in relation to bias?).

Implicit bias and stereotype threat might contribute to the (likely) complex factors that would figure in a full explanation of why some groups are under-represented in philosophy. Professor Louise Antony, in her paper *Different Voices or Perfect Storm? Explaining the dearth of women in philosophy*, takes up another explanation that has recently been offered by Stich and Buckwalter, on the basis of data garnered from experimental philosophy.[6] On this hypothesis (one of a range of "Different Voice" hypotheses advanced in recent decades), women may have systematically discordant intuitions, in response to thought experiments. Might this explain the attrition rate of women in philosophy?

Antony argued that serious methodological problems beset the claims from Stich and Buckwalter: for example, the effects (discordant intuitions) were found in only some of the experiments analysed, and in as many experiments *men* were found to have discordant intuitions. So the hypothesis does not ap-

[5]J. Saul, "Unconscious Influences and Women in Philosophy", http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/the-psychology-of-philosophy/

[6]Stich & Buckwalter, 2010, "Gender and Philosophical Intuition", http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1683066.

pear to fit the data. (It is also worth noting that no support has been garnered for this hypothesis in relation to disabled or BME philosophers.)

Moreover, Antony argues, there is significant damage in pursuing this hypothesis any further: claims about differences, she suggests, tend to be understood as categorical, and can fuel essentialising claims that have served to marginalise women. So pursuing this hypothesis could have dangerous effects. A rival hypothesis, to which research funding would be better directed, is the "Perfect storm" hypothesis, according to which various effects converge and intensify to marginalise and exclude women from philosophy (an example would be that of implicit bias and stereotype threat, mentioned above).

It is worth noting that the different voice hypothesis is not, strictly speaking, inconsistent with the perfect storm hypothesis: one part of the perfect storm could be that women have discordant intuitions. If true, then the dangerous effects would be ones that would require care to be managed (by explaining that it is fallacious to move from claims about statistical differences to categorical ones). But Antony's argument is in part pragmatic: given that research funding is limited, which should we bet on? The methodological concerns raised with Stich and Buckwalter's paper support the conclusion that we should jettison the different voice hypothesis as a main line of inquiry.

The explanations for under-representation, therefore, are likely to be complex and subtle, and will likely include reference to 'micro-inequities' of the sort highlighted by Professor Samantha Brennan in her paper, 'Re-thinking the Moral Significance of Micro-Inequities'. The cumulative effect of small deficits in recognition and support can be significant, Brennan argues, drawing, for example, on the work of Haslanger[7], Wylie, and the MIT Barnard Report on Women, Work and the Academy.

Brennan highlights the extent to which such micro-inequities have been overlooked in moral and political philosophy, which have often focused on "evils"[8], or "absolute rights"[9], or have focused on actions that are themselves wrong[10] rather than on unjust outcomes that may result from small acts which are not, individually, wrong. Highlighting those thinkers who have attended to

[7] Haslanger, 2008; Wylie, 2011; Barnard Centre for Research on Women report, Wylie, Jakobsen, Fosado, 2007.
[8] Card, 2002.
[9] Fried, 1974.
[10] Nozick, 1974.

small harms in their moral philosophy,[11] Brennan calls for more attention to such harms in moral theory, as well as further attention to the possible ways of addressing micro-inequities. Amongst the positive proposals Brennan considers, are those of engaging in "micro-affirmations" – small acts of support – and the importance of bystander training, which equips individuals to become "active bystanders" who can play a role in de-escalating hostile situations.

These instructive positive proposals again call for further analysis: if small harms are to be incorporated into moral theory, might individuals have duties to avoid them, or to mitigate them? Is it ever appropriate to hold individuals liable to blame for small harms (Brennan seems to suggest not)?

Not all explanations of under-representation need appeal only to micro-inequities, when larger obstacles are all too apparent. Whilst the three papers by Saul, Antony and Brennan offered theoretical accounts of the subtle causes of under-representation of women in the profession, and presented suggestions on how to overcome the problems, Teresa Blankmeyer-Burke's talk aimed to present some of the issues faced by the Deaf community in Academia. In particular, Blankmeyer-Burke recounted some of her experiences as a deaf philosopher. The ability to access only partially resources that others take for granted was one of the focuses of her talk. She noted, for instance, that very few presenters when using powerpoint take into account the fact that deaf people must look at their interpreter in sign language when the talk is delivered and consequently cannot look at the slides. But partiality of access is also the result of poor interpreting facilities provided at conferences. Blankmeyer-Burke explained that under budgetary pressures conference organisers often tend to provide a minimal interpreting service. For instance, they provide cheaper less experienced interpreters for the business part of meetings and offer no provision for the social part. As everybody knows, the latter is often among the most intellectually satisfying components of conferences. A consequence of the partiality of this access leaves deaf academics unable to participate fully in academic life, whilst their demands for better provisions are taken to be excessive. As it was remarked during the conference, it is important to remember that poor provision results in a two-way loss. The deaf academic is denied full access to others' views and presence but other participants lose the opportunity to benefit from the views and company of the deaf participants. This talk was the catalyst for action soliciting various scholarly funding bodies in the UK to ring-

[11] Parfit, 1984; Kernohan, 1998.

fence funding to help organisers make their conferences fully inclusive. This call has now been answered by some sponsoring bodies such as the Analysis Trust and the Mind Association.

The conference was extremely successful, and received attention in the press. "The Philosophers' Magazine" for instance published a long report on the conference. It is particularly pleasing to note that the conference has also served as a catalyst for positive action by the BPA, scholarly associations and the society of women in philosophy in the UK.

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